

INSPIRED SPEECH IN EARLY MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM I

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When we contemplate the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism we are bound to be struck by the significance of the creation of scripture that accompanies the movement: the new production of *sūtras* signals a religious revolution. It is not merely the content of these *sūtras* that is of significance, but the very fact of their coming into being. The broad religious issue at stake here is that of the reception of revelation¹ by the community in ways that are open as opposed to closed. In a closed tradition the truth is seen as revealed at a particular point in time through a particular individual or group of individuals; beyond this individual or group (in either space or time) revelation is inaccessible. In an open tradition these restrictions on access to the truth are denied. In this article I shall try to work towards an understanding of the shift from a closed to an open tradition that I believe is indicated in the rise of Mahāyāna. The attempt will be made to discover the extent to which the two traditions (pre-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism) in fact see themselves as closed or open, and to find the means whereby the shift in question took place. The method adopted will be to investigate the contribution made to the articulation of revelation by the 'founder' (the Buddha) on the one hand, and by the members of the community, contemporary with and subsequent to the founder, on the other hand. Since revelation was preserved chiefly in *sūtra*, most of our effort will go into determining the means whereby *sūtra* was generated. The two concepts that prove to be most crucial to this analysis are 'the word of the Buddha' (*buddhavacana*) and 'inspired speech' (*pratibhāna*).

Mahāyāna Buddhism first becomes visible to the historian as a movement centred around the public expounding of texts. These texts were called '*sūtras*'² and were taken as true and authoritative by those who recited and expounded them. When traditional Buddhists began to take the movement seriously one of their main criticisms was that these alleged *sūtras* were spurious; they could not be accepted as Buddhist *sūtras* because they were not the word of the Buddha and hence not grounded in his wisdom and enlightenment. Many responses were given by members of the new movement to the traditionalist

attacks. Generally speaking such responses included the claim that the Mahāyāna *sūtras* were indeed preached by the Buddha and were hence as legitimate as the accepted canon.³ One might well gain the impression, therefore, that both the attackers and the defenders agreed on the fundamental point that *sūtra* must be the literal word of the historical Buddha and disagreed only on what specific texts fulfilled this requirement. But did the early Mahāyānists really believe that their texts were the speech of the 'historical' Buddha? Is the dispute merely a disagreement over particular historical facts? Examination will show that the matter is more complex than this, and that it involves a fundamental religious shift implicating the view of history and revelation.

It will be convenient to begin by determining the initial status of the requirement that *sūtra* be the literal word of the Buddha. To what extent and in what sense is this requirement acknowledged in the traditional canon? Next, it will be found profitable to explore the canon further regarding one of the means of *sūtra* production that is found to deviate somewhat from the *buddhavacana* paradigm, namely that of 'inspired speech' as indicated by the use of *prati-bhā* constructions. Finally, the notion of inspired speech in early Mahāyāna will be investigated, chiefly as found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (*The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*), an early *sūtra* of the Perfection of Wisdom group.

SŪTRA AS THE WORD OF THE BUDDHA

It is clear that in the early days of Mahāyāna the conviction was common that *sūtra* had to be the word of the Buddha. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* warns the devotees of the perfection of wisdom that they must be prepared to hear this *sūtra* rejected and reviled on such grounds by both traditional Buddhists and other Mahāyāna groups. The attack by the traditionalists, which is of more immediate importance to us, is described as follows:

Futhermore, Mara, the Evil One, may come along in the guise of a Shramana, and say: 'Give up what you have heard up to now, abandon what you have gained so far! And if you follow this advice, we will again and again approach you, and say to you: "What you have heard just now, that is not the word of the Buddha. It is poetry, the work of poets. But what I here teach to you, that is the teaching of the Buddha, that is the word of the Buddha".'⁴

There are several things worthy of note here. First, the words of the traditionalists as quoted allude to a canonical utterance,⁵ and with their ring of orthodoxy probably represent accurately the attacks made on Mahāyāna. Second, the attack is obviously viewed as very dangerous. The passage casts the traditionalists in the role of Māra, the prime tempter and enemy for Buddhists. The efforts of these monks to call Mahāyānists back to orthodoxy

were seen as a terrible temptation which a member of the new movement (a *bodhisattva*) must reject at all costs. If he gives in he is a backslider.⁶ Finally, we are favoured with a clear expression of the issue under debate at the time, namely that of authorship versus revelation. The new *sūtras* are dismissed as 'poetry, the work of poets' (*kavikṛtaṃ kāvyam*), to which is opposed *buddhavacana*, the truth as perfectly revealed (uncovered, opened up, displayed) to the community by the Buddha. Other early Mahāyāna works attest to the same traditionalist criticism in much the same terms, so we are left in no doubt as to its prevalence.⁷

Is this understanding of *sūtra* evidenced in the canon? No doubt the classic canonical statement of what *sūtra* is, of what qualifies as *sūtra*, is found in the accounts of the First Council in the Vinaya.⁸ The statement is given in narrative form as follows.

After the death of the Lord a council is convened at Rājagṛha in order to collect and recite the *dharma* (*sūtra*)⁹ and *vinaya*. The council is to be attended only by those who are utterly pure and have reached the highest goal (Arhatship), yet Ānanda, who was the Buddha's personal attendant and therefore heard and retained the Buddha's discourses, has not yet reached the goal. It is to everyone's relief that he attains it at the eleventh hour and joins the council. When Mahākāśyapa directs the collecting and arranging of the *sūtras* Ānanda is the chief witness called upon. According to some of the accounts he verifies the context and arrangement of the *sūtras*, while in others he actually recites the entire collection of *sūtras* from memory.¹⁰ (Further witnesses, themselves *arhats*, are called upon to verify the accuracy of his recollections.) At the conclusion of his task the *sūtra-piṭaka* is considered established and the door to further production of *sūtra* closed.

The main point of the account is to show that the truth revealed by the Buddha has been transmitted to the community in a perfect and final state. The council is the medium for this transmission and hence must be perfectly pure. It is especially important that Ānanda have such purity since he is the chief medium; his attainment of Arhatship is crucial, for it is not enough that he be learned (*bahuśruta*—'one who has heard much'): he must be able to give what he has heard undistorted and unsullied. Ānanda's function is that of a clean receptacle.¹¹

In connection with the above point the accounts also aim to define the revelation, to give the criteria that permit something to be counted as *dharma* (or *sūtra*). And here we find the *buddhavacana* requirement strongly expressed. *Sūtra* is portrayed as ideally the direct record of the Buddha's speech. The accounts of the First Council differ on a good many points, but in the later and more developed accounts this *buddhavacana* ideal is put forth very resolutely. In one version, for example, the gods, seeing that Ānanda is about to recite the *sūtras*, say to one another, 'Be it known, good sirs, that the noble Ānanda is

about to proclaim the *sūtra*, the *dharma*, spoken by the Tathāgata. We must listen attentively.’¹² In another account, when Ānanda gives the opening formula of his *sūtra* recitation the *arhats*, deeply moved, say, ‘With our own eyes we have beheld the World Honoured One [*Bhagavat*]; now we hear his words’.¹³ Having recited all of the *sūtras*, Ānanda says (according to the same account), ‘All of this *dharma* that I have retained in my memory is what was spoken by the Buddha, who has now gone to *Nirvāṇa*’.¹⁴ In one version the two points—the finality of the arrangement of *sūtra* and the definition of this *sūtra* as the word of the Buddha—are neatly summed up at the conclusion of Ānanda’s recital:

Then Mahākāśyapa said to Ānanda, ‘There are just this many *sūtras* in the *āgamas*; beyond this there are none.’ Having said this he descended from the high seat. Then the Venerable Kāśyapa addressed the great gathering: ‘Be it known that the *sūtras* spoken by the World Honoured One have now all been assembled.’¹⁵

Yet despite the *buddhavacana* definition of *sūtra* implied in the Council accounts, all of these accounts, not excepting the more developed ones, show an awareness that Ānanda was not a direct witness to all of the Buddha’s sermons and, more importantly, that *not all of the discourses that form the basis for the sūtras were in fact spoken by the Buddha*.¹⁶ Some, for example, were spoken by various disciples. These facts are admitted because they are obvious to anyone who reads the *sūtras*, but they are not made much of; the second point, in fact, is often acknowledged very briefly and left in obvious disharmony with the *buddhavacana* criterion so stoutly championed elsewhere in the narrative.

The ideal, to sum up, is this. The Buddha revealed the truth on various occasions; his discourses were directly witnessed and retained; these discourses were then rendered to the council in a perfect state and there bound together, so to speak, in a final and closed corpus, the *sūtra-piṭaka*, which represents the revelation as possessed by the community. The fact that some *sūtras* do not record the word of the Buddha remains to cast its shadow.

Professor Lamotte suggests that we not take the *buddhavacana* definition in a narrow sense. He remarks:

Le Dharma [exposé dans les *Sūtra*] est à proprement parler Parole du Buddha (*buddhavacana*), mais cette définition n’est pas à prendre au sens restreint. A en juger d’après les explications fournies par tous les Vinaya les uns après les autres—*Vin. des Mahāsāṃghika* (T 1425, k.13, p. 336 a 21); *Vin. des Mūlasarv.* (T 1442, k. 26, p. 771 b 22); *Vin. pāli* (IV, p. 15); *Vin. des Dharmagupta* (T 1428, k. 11, p. 639 a 16); *Vin. des Sarvāstivādīn* (T 1435, k. 9, p. 71 b 1)—le Dharma est ce qui est énoncé par le Buddha, sans doute et avant tout, mais aussi par les auditeurs (*śrāvaka*), les sages ermites (*ṛṣi*), les dieux (*deva*) et les êtres apparitionnels (*upapāduka*).¹⁷

This statement is perceptive but, like the Council accounts, leaves certain questions unanswered. If the Buddha’s word is the model, how can the *dharma*

(and hence *sūtra*) be that which is spoken by this assortment of beings (*śrāvakas*, sages and so on)? What is the connection between the model and the alternatives? Under what *circumstances* are those other than the Buddha admitted to speak words acceptable as *sūtra*? The problem is not solved by reference to Lamotte's sources for in fact these sources differ significantly from one another in their definition of *dharma*, he having chosen the widest of the definitions (that from the *Sarvāstivādin Vinaya*) for his exposition.¹⁸

In the end, of course, the surest method of investigating this issue is to study the *sūtra-piṭaka* itself. I am not here interested in attempting to determine how many *sūtras*, as a matter of historical fact, record the Buddha's speech and how many record the speech of others, but rather in the more manageable question of what the *sūtras* themselves say about the matter.

It is found that the great majority of *sūtras* do indeed present themselves as giving the Buddha's words directly. There is, however, a significant number of *sūtras* that encapsulate the words of others. These may be divided into three types: (1) discourses that expand and interpret *buddhavacana*; (2) straightforward sermons or remarks that have no such obvious relation to the Buddha's word; (3) creative, spontaneous and inspired utterances.

The first category is of great importance to the tradition.¹⁹ Discourses by the Buddha can be either in brief or in detail,²⁰ and it is only wisdom such as characterizes the greatest disciples that allows the brief utterances to be interpreted and transformed into detailed discourses. Śāriputra is the most famous for his abilities in this area.²¹ We see here the establishing of a process whereby disciples of the Buddha can open up or extend *buddhavacana*. The apparent newness of such a discourse, it is implied, is deceiving: it is merely the natural unfolding, in light of the wisdom of the disciples in question, of what the Buddha has himself revealed.

The second category embraces a good many *sūtras*, many more than the preceding category.²² The great majority of the discourses in question are given by a select few Great Disciples (such as Śāriputra, Ānanda, Mahākāśyapa, and Mahāmaudgalyāyana), though occasionally we hear from lesser monks and nuns, laypeople, gods, and so on. As far as content is concerned this is a very mixed group, and the utterances range from virtual repetition of standard doctrinal material, most of which apparently has its origin in the Buddha, to comparatively free and creative speech that is less directly dependent on standard formulas and on words of the Buddha. In terms of the present research it is these apparently creative speeches that intrigue us, for we wonder how they can be related to the *buddhavacana* criterion.

In pursuing this same problem category (3) utterances are of exceptional importance, and for this reason they will be studied separately in the next section of the paper. Obviously, to the extent that people other than the

Buddha can give creative and spontaneous speech that does not rely on his formulations, speech that can be acceptable as the basis of *sūtra*, the requirement that *sūtra* be *buddhavacana* is thrown in doubt, and the claim that the tradition sees itself as closed is made questionable. In attempting to isolate this category of utterances I have had recourse to a simple criterion, namely that the passage must contain a *prati-bhā* construction. This criterion does not do the job perfectly, giving up a group consisting of all such utterances and only such utterances as are creative, spontaneous and inspired, but there are some advantages in exploring the use of one construction in depth, and the procedure will be found to yield interesting results.

We must now return to our earlier problem, namely: How are such utterances by those other than the Buddha, which we have now arranged in three categories, related to *buddhavacana*? Is it, in fact, necessary that there be any link at all to the Buddha? These questions are, in part, Buddhological questions, and they require Buddhological answers. The canon firmly insists on the fundamental difference between the function of the Buddha as teacher and the function of other teachers of *dharma*. When a Buddha arises in the world (a rare event) he, having by himself penetrated the world with his insight, makes the truth known to others (*imaṃ lokam . . . sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedeti*);²³ he is the trainer of the human steer (*purisa-damma-sārathi*), the teacher of gods and men (*satthā deva-manussānaṃ*); he teaches the *dharma* (*dhammaṃ deseti*) and reveals the pure way of life that accords with it (*brahmaccariyaṃ pakāseti*). When others, even the greatest disciples, teach the *dharma*, they teach what was first made known by him. To be sure, they teach it only after they have personally verified it by their own experience, but their personal realization itself stems from arduous training in the Buddha's teaching. The distinction is sometimes expressed in Buddhist texts through the common symbolism of the wheel of *dharma*: the Buddha has set this wheel in motion, while the function of his disciples is to keep it rolling.²⁴ Here is another way of articulating the distinction (from the *Gopakamoggallāna Sutta*):

'Is there even one monk, Ānanda, who is possessed in every way and in every part of all those things of which the good Gotama, perfected one, fully Self-Awakened One, was possessed?'

'There is not even one monk, brahman, who is possessed in every way and in every part of all those things of which the Lord was possessed, perfected one, fully Self-Awakened One. For, brahman, this Lord was one to make arise a Way that had not arisen (before), to bring about a Way not brought about (before), to show a Way not shown (before); he was a knower of the Way, an understander of the Way, skilled in the Way. But the disciples are now Way-followers following after him.'²⁵

Given this Buddhological framework it is no surprise that the community defines *dharma* (and hence *sūtra*) as ideally the word of the Buddha, and it should also come as no surprise to learn that the Buddha is given a position of

control over *all* expressions of *dharma*. For this is found to be the case. In brief, utterances by people other than the Buddha are accepted as the basis for *sūtra* only with his certification.

Three types of certification may be distinguished: approval after the event, approval before the event, and authorization of persons.

The first works as follows.²⁶ Someone gives a discourse; the hearer of the discourse subsequently repeats it verbatim to the Buddha; the Buddha gives his approval of it. He commonly gives his approval by saying that under the circumstances he would have said precisely the same thing. In some cases he even repeats the discourse word for word when giving his approval. In these ways he transmutes the utterance after the fact into *buddhavacana*.

By certification before the event I refer to formulas whereby the Buddha invites someone to give a discourse on his behalf.²⁷ Even where such discourses are not followed by certification after the event (as they frequently are) it is evident that they are to be considered as '*buddhavacana* by permission'.

Even with these two types of certification taken into account there still remain a fair number of *sūtra* discourses left uncertified.²⁸ But it will be found that the individuals responsible for such discourses, almost always the Great Disciples, have on various occasions been so praised by the Buddha with respect to their wisdom and ability as to be considered authorized by him to speak *dharma*, their words certified in advance.²⁹

All of the three categories of utterance listed earlier receive certification by one or another of these means, even category (1) utterances with their obvious inherent connection with *buddhavacana*. And when all three modes of certification are taken into account there remain very few *sūtras* in the canon that are based on discourses presented as neither given by the Buddha nor certified by him. Of all the canonical definitions of *dharma* noted by Lamotte in the passage cited earlier, I am, therefore, most favourably impressed by the following one from the *Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya*:

By '*dharma*' is meant that which the Buddha has spoken and that which the Buddha has certified. By 'that which the Buddha has spoken' is meant that which the Buddha has personally and with his own mouth spoken; by 'that which the Buddha has certified' is meant that which the Buddha's disciples or others have spoken and which has been certified by the Buddha.³⁰

Now it is evident that all of these certification schemes formally require that the Buddha be present in the world, that he be accessible to certify. After his death the first two forms of certification become impossible and after the death of the Companions, the Great Disciples who have received personal sanction from the Buddha, there is no possibility of *dharma* being preached under the third sort of certification. *Sūtra* production must here come to an end.

The findings of the present section may be summarized as follows:

(1) At the time of early Mahāyāna the view that *sūtra* must record *buddhavacana* was used by traditional Buddhists against the new Mahāyāna productions.

(2) Rather strong and literalist statements of this position can in fact be attested in canonical sources, such as in some of the accounts of the First Council.

(3) A look at the *sūtra-piṭaka*, however, shows a more complicated situation. Here *buddhavacana* is still the ideal but can be extended through the process of certification to include the utterances of others.

(4) Such certification assumes the Buddha's presence in the world.

PRATI-BHĀ IN THE SŪTRA-PITAKA

In exploring the limits of creative and independent speech as presented in the canon, the third group of utterances listed earlier, that of inspired speech, is of exceptional importance. In ancient India, as elsewhere, there was a recognition of the existence of a process whereby the reception of intuition or insight is directly linked with the faculty of expression. The seer and the poet belong to the same family to the extent that they are participants in this process.³¹ Of the terms used in India to capture this dual activity of unimpeded reception and expression, some of the most interesting are the *prati-bhā* constructions, including various verbal forms from the root *bhā* and prefix *prati-*, as well as the noun *pratibhāna*. A passage from Gonda's *The Vision of the Vedic Poets* will serve to introduce the concept as issue:

A term of no mean interest in this connection is *pratibhā*. . . It etymologically belongs to *prati-bhā*—‘to shine upon; come into sight, present oneself to’ but also ‘to appear to the mind, to flash upon the thought, occur to, become clear or manifest’ . . . It usually denotes ‘a sudden thought, “ein aufleuchtender Gedanke”’ (Petr. Dict., a quick understanding or insight’, then also ‘presence of mind, wit, genius’, ‘boldness, audacity’, ‘fancy, imagination’. The substantive *pratibhāna*-, moreover, means ‘obviousness, intelligence, presence of mind, quickwittedness, brilliance’. In *Buddhist texts the association with ‘readiness in speech’ is perhaps more marked, hence ‘presence of mind, brilliance, inspiration’, especially as manifested in speech.* . . [emphasis mine]³²

The following remarks should contribute in some measure to the understanding of the use of the expression, and hence the understanding of inspired speech, in the Buddhist canon.

Of the roughly two dozen occasions I have noted where *prati-bhā* (= Pali *paṭi-bhā*) constructions are used in the *sūtra-piṭaka* (excluding occurrences of *pratibhāna* = Pali *paṭibhāna*), over two-thirds fall into two equally common categories:

(a) Someone is *invited* (usually by the Buddha) to have something ‘occur’ or

'be revealed' to him, whereupon he gives a *doctrinal, prose* discourse.³³ For example:

Now on that occasion the Exalted One was seated surrounded by monks, the day being the sabbath. And when the Exalted One for much of the night had instructed, stirred, fired, and gladdened the monks with a talk about dhamma, on looking round and seeing that the order of monks was perfectly silent, he called to the venerable Sāriputta, saying: 'Sāriputta, the order of monks has banished sloth-and-torpor. Let some dhamma-talk occur to you. [*Paṭibhātu taṃ Sāriputta bhikkhūnaṃ dhammi-kathā.*] My back aches. I will ease it.

'Very well, sir', replied the venerable Sāriputta to the Exalted One.

Then the Exalted One had his robe spread fourfold, and lying on his right side he took up the lion-posture, resting foot on foot, mindful and composed, fixing his thoughts on rising up again.

Thereupon the venerable Sāriputta called to the monks, saying: 'Monks, your reverences'.

'Yes, Sāriputta, your reverence', replied those monks to the venerable Sāriputta, who said:

'Your reverences, whosoever hath not faith in good states. . .'.³⁴

Sometimes the discourse thus given is followed by 'certification after the event', as in the case just referred to, where the Buddha says at the conclusion of Sāriputta's sermon: 'Well said! Well said, Sāriputta!' (*Sādhu sādhu, Sāriputta!*),³⁵ and then goes on to repeat the sermon in full.

(b) Something *spontaneously* 'occurs' or 'is revealed' to someone and he gives notice of this; after having been *invited* (usually by the Buddha) to give expression to his inspiration he gives a *verse of praise*.³⁶ For example:

Then the venerable Vangīsa, arising from his seat, and draping his outer robe over one shoulder, bent his clasped hands saluting toward the Exalted One, and said: 'It is revealed to me, Exalted One! it is revealed to me, Blessed One!' [*Paṭibhāti maṃ Bhagavā paṭibhāti maṃ Sugatā ti.*]

And the Exalted One said: 'Be it revealed to thee, Vangīsa'. [*Paṭibhātu taṃ Vangīsā ti.*]

Then the venerable Vangīsa extolled the Exalted One in his presence with suitable verses:

To-day on feast-day, for full purity,
Five hundred brethren are together come.
Such as have cut their fetters, cut their bonds,
Seers who are free from rebirth and from ill.

.....
All we are sons of the Exalted One;
No sterile chaff may amongst us be found.
I worship him who strikes down craving's dart.
I greet the offspring of the sun's great line.³⁷

Outside of these two categories most of the instances of *prati-bhā* construc-

tions involve either similes occurring to people, or things being revealed (clear, evident, manifest) to the Buddha.

From the passages quoted representing the two major categories it can be seen that it would be misleading to suggest that all *prati-bhā* constructions indicate inspired speech in a strong sense. Only utterances of the second type, with their greater degree of spontaneity and emotional depth, can be taken without hesitation as involving inspiration in the generally accepted sense of the word. In fact, one could argue that *prati-bhā* speech is either doctrinally rich, as in (a), or inspired, as in (b), but not both. I believe, however, that it is legitimate to use the term 'inspired speech' for both sorts of utterance provided we are careful not to confuse the two or overlook their differences. It is convenient to be able to employ a single English term to refer to what is expressed with a single term in Sanskrit (and Pali); besides, the two sorts of construction are significantly related, for they indicate, first, that according to this literature the Buddha not only permitted but invited religious speech from his followers, and, second, that it was not merely considered acceptable but highly desirable that such speech have the quality of spontaneity.

Yet the two constructions do imply different views of inspiration. Most importantly, the spontaneity that each sort of speech is supposed to have arises from different sources. Two passages may be quoted to help explain this, one referring to the Buddha, who is the ideal category (a) speaker, and one referring to the monk Vaṅṡisa, who is the model for category (b) speech. The first is from the *Abhayarāja-kumāra-sutta*, wherein Prince Abhaya converses with the Buddha:

'Revered sir, if those who are learned nobles and learned brahmins and learned householders and learned recluses approach the Tathāgata and ask a question they have constructed—has the Lord already reflected in his mind on this, thinking "Whoever, having approached me, questions me like this, then, asked thus, I will answer them thus," or does (the answer) occur to a Tathāgata immediately?' [*udāhu tñāso v'etaṃ Tathāgataṃ paṭibhāṭīti?*]

'Well then, Prince, I will ask you a question in return. As it may please you, so may you answer it. What do you think about this, Prince? Are you skilled in the various parts of a chariot?'

'Yes, revered sir, I am skilled in the various parts of a chariot.'

'What do you think about this, Prince? If those who have approached you should ask thus: "What is the name of this particular part of the chariot?" would you have already reflected on this in your mind, thinking: "If those who have approached me should ask thus, then I will answer them thus," or would (the answer) occur to you immediately?'

'Because, revered sir, I am a renowned charioteer, skilled in the various parts of a chariot, all the particular parts of a chariot are fully known to me, so (the answer) would occur to me immediately.'

'Even so, Prince, if those who are learned nobles and learned brahmins and learned householders and learned recluses approach the Tathāgata and ask him a

question they have constructed, (the answer) occurs to the Tathāgata immediately. What is the reason for this? It is, Prince, that the constitution of *dhamma* is fully penetrated by the Tathāgata, and because of his full penetration of the constitution of *dhamma* (the answer) occurs to the Tathāgata immediately.' [*Sā hi rājakumāra Tathāgatassa dhammadhātu suppatividdhā yassa dhammadhātuyā suppatividdhattā thānaso v'etam Tathāgataṃ paṭibhāṭīti.*]³⁸

This passage asserts that the essential truths are continually open or accessible to the Buddha, so that he is able to answer any question concerning them immediately and unselfconsciously. He is, so to speak, in a state of constant clarity. Note that the *prati-bhā* construction suggests both this clarity or receptivity and his ability to speak without hesitation. In both respects the Buddha is the model, and it is to this that he calls others. When he asks them to 'let it be clear' (*pratibhātu*) he is not asking for a carefully prepared sermon but is asking that they speak from their own hard-won state of mental clarity. The states of mind in question here, which are chiefly involved in category (a) constructions, fit within the wisdom rather than the faith tradition in Buddhism and are portrayed as the fruit of ardent and progressive cultivation in morality, asceticism and meditation; such states, when achieved, are permanent and reliable, and may be called upon whenever necessary. Hence the Buddha need not wait for his Great Disciples to become 'inspired': he can ask them to 'let it be clear' (that is, speak fluently from clarity of mind) without fear that they will come up dry.

The second passage to be quoted concerns Vangīsa, the other model speaker. On one occasion, after he has given verses of praise for the Buddha, the latter asks him: 'Say now, Vangīsa, were these verses of praise for the Buddha, the latter asks him: 'Say now, Vangīsa, were these verses thought out by thee beforehand, or have they been revealed to thee just on the spot?' (*Kinnu te Vangīsa imā gāthāyo pubbe parivitakkita udāhu thānaso va tam paṭibhanti tī?*)³⁹ Vangīsa replies, 'Nay, lord, these verses were not thought out by me beforehand; they were revealed to me just on the spot.'⁴⁰ The Buddha then expresses his approval of such spontaneous versifying. As in the previous case, therefore, the ideal is not a laboriously and self-consciously constructed utterance but the free movement of the mind. But the inspired speech (*pratibhāna*) of Vangīsa is not the same, and has not the same source, as that of the Great Disciples whom the Buddha invites to give extemporaneous sermons. Not only is Vangīsa not an *arhat* when he gives his poetical outbursts, but one actually gets the impression that he is having some trouble adapting himself to the monastic life.⁴¹ His *pratibhāna* comes not from outstanding wisdom or enlightenment but from his faith and his ability as an extempore poet. Before joining the Order he was a professional *kavi*, wandering from town to town 'drunk with poetic inspiration' (*kāveyyamatta*);⁴² when he heard the Buddha preach he left the world, and his trade, to strive as a monk. With him

be brought his gift of inspired versifying, which he used to praise the Buddha and his chief disciples as well as to encourage himself to his task. Inspiration is not his usual state of being but comes upon him at specific times, usually when he is moved by faith.

To sum up, we have in the *sūtra-pitaka* two major sorts of *prati-bhā* construction, which refer to two sorts of creative speech by people other than the Buddha, this speech being acceptable under certain circumstances as the basis of *sūtra*. These two kinds of creative speech share the important characteristic of coming freely from a state of mind different from, and higher than, the normal. They differ in these respects: the first kind tends to be connected with mental states that are ideally open to all who strive correctly, permanent, and indicative of wisdom; the second kind tends to be connected with mental states that arise from an inborn faculty (a natural gift), that are sporadic, and that are indicative of faith.

It must be remembered that however great and of whatever kind one's *pratibhāna*, in order to be acceptable as *sūtra* one's utterance had to be certified by the Buddha. Personal *pratibhāna* is hence subordinate to *buddhavacana*, and is in fact authoritative only when transformed into extended *buddhavacana*. One can see this position set forth in the *Uttaravipatti Sutta*, where the monk Uttara, who has preached a particular doctrine, is asked by Sakka (Indra), 'What then, sir—is this the venerable Uttara's own *pratibhāna* or the word of the Lord, the Arahāt, the Fully Enlightened One?'⁴³ Uttara's reply concludes with the words, 'whatsoever be well spoken, all that is the word of the Exalted One, arahant, the fully awakened One, wholly based thereon is both what we and others say.'⁴⁴

It will be noted, however, that despite this bowing down to *buddhavacana*, the *Uttaravipatti* exemplifies a tendency in the understanding of *buddhavacana* that actually weakens it as an historically defined concept. For there is serious ambiguity in the statement that 'whatsoever be well spoken, all that is the word of the Exalted One.' This can mean that all of the good things in the tradition come from the Buddha, but it can equally well imply that *buddhavacana* is being redefined to mean 'whatsoever be well spoken', rather than meaning the actual words of Gautama. In other words, we may be witnessing a tendency to have *buddhavacana* defined as that speech which is of the greatest spiritual worth. This tendency is seen in other canonical statements aimed at giving criteria whereby to determine what is scripture. According to the 'Great Authorities' (*Mahāpadesa*),⁴⁵ for example, the status of the utterance in question is to be determined by checking it against existing *dharma* and *vinaya* to see if it harmonizes in import. If it does, it may be accepted; if it does not, it must be rejected. Formally, the *buddhavacana* ideal is again carefully upheld, but, despite some minor concern for the honesty of the transmitter and consequent accuracy of the historical transmission, the drift of the scheme is to promote a

model of *buddhavacana* based on meaning rather than history. Finally, there is the famous and beautiful passage from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*:

‘The doctrines, Upāli, of which you may know: “These doctrines lead one not to complete weariness (of the world), nor to dispassion, nor to ending, nor to calm, nor to knowledge, nor to the awakening, nor to the cool [*nibbāna*]”—regard them definitely as not Dhamma, not the discipline, not the word of the Teacher. But the doctrines of which you may know. “These doctrines lead one to complete weariness, dispassion, ending, calm, knowledge, the awakening, the cool”—regard them unreservedly as Dhamma, the discipline, the word of the Teacher.’⁴⁶

Again there is no formal challenge to the *buddhavacana* criterion—the point of the scheme is to determine what is the word of the Teacher (or ‘teaching of the Teacher’, *satthusāna*—but now there are no historical checks at all and we are left with a purely functional understanding of *buddhavacana*.

Before we conclude that traditional Buddhism had no sense of history, we should remember that the *sūtra-piṭaka* was *in fact* established as a stable body of literature quite early; after its establishment changes in existing *sūtras* tended to be minor and conservative, and little new *sūtra* was generated.⁴⁷ The conviction that the time when the Buddha revealed the truth was past and that no such revelation could come again (at least for a very long time) was, therefore, powerful. Hence it is fair to say that the concept of *buddhavacana*, historically understood, put strong limits on the contribution people’s *prati-bhāna* could make to the corpus of revealed truth. By and large, then, the religious community did indeed see itself as belonging to a closed tradition.

This article will be continued in the next issue.

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NOTES

- 1 Three expressions used in this paper should be explained at the outset. ‘Revelation’ refers to the uncovering, disclosure, discovery, becoming clear, of truth that liberates or saves; it is also sometimes used as a synonym for ‘the revealed truth’. The term thus used need not entail theism. ‘Traditional’ Buddhism (as well as ‘traditionalist’) refers to pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism. In using this term I adopt the position of an observer contemporary with the rise of Mahāyāna. It is from such a standpoint—certainly not from the present day perspective—that it makes sense to distinguish this group as traditional. Finally, the term ‘canon’ is used herein, with

some reservations, to refer to the body of scripture (the *Tripitaka*) acknowledged by this traditional Buddhism.

- 2 I am not here interested in the semantic range of the term 'sūtra' for Buddhists during the period in question. It is quite possible that they would have acknowledged the existence of sūtras within non-Buddhist religious traditions, referring in such cases to a literary *genre*. I am concerned only with sūtras that they regarded as authoritative. To avoid the continual use of such awkward expressions as 'canonical sūtra', 'scriptural sūtra', 'Buddhist sūtra' and so on, I speak simply of sūtra.
- 3 In later times many Mahāyāna apologists were not above claiming that the Mahāyāna sūtras had been kept in secret places till conditions in the world of men were favourable, at which time they were brought forth. See, e.g. Tāranātha's account in Lama Chimpa and Alaka Chattopadhyaya, trans., Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (ed.) *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India*, Simla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study 1970, p. 98.
- 4 AP, 328. Reference to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (AP in the notes) is, unless otherwise noted, to Rājendralāla Mitra (ed.), *Aṣṭasāhasrikā, a Collection of Discourses on the Metaphysics of the Mahāyāna School of the Buddhists*, Calcutta, Asiatic Society of Bengal 1888, and the English translation of Conze, Edward Conze, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary*, Bolinas, Calif., Four Seasons Foundation 1973. Mitra's spelling is normalized and punctuation is added.
- 5 SN II, 267 and AN I, 72–73. (This is noted by Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, p. xiv.) Reference to the Pāli Canon is to the Pāli Text Society's edition in Roman script (with occasional normalization of spelling).
- 6 The passage in question (AP, 328–329) says that the *bodhisattva* who is thrown into anxiety and doubt by the traditionalist criticisms is not 'irreversible' (*avinivartanīya*), which means, sociologically considered, that he is a backslider.
- 7 See, e.g. *Sad.*, 272; *Lotus*, 259–260. Reference to the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka Sūtra* is, unless otherwise noted, to the Sanskrit edition of Kern and Nanjio (H. Kern and B. Nanjio (eds.), *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka*, St. Petersburg: [Bibliotheca Buddhica 10], 1908–1912—*Sad.* in the notes) and the English translation of Kern (H. Kern, trans., *Saddharma-Pūṇḍarīka, or, The Lotus of the True Law*, New York, Dover 1963 [originally published by Clarendon Press, Oxford in 1884 as Vol. XXI of 'The Sacred Books of the East']—*Lotus* in the notes).
- 8 Reference to the Buddhist scriptures in Chinese is to the Taishō edition of Watanabe and Takakusu (T in the notes). The accounts of the First Council are found in the following places:

Theravādin Vinaya: Cullavagga, Section 11 (*Pañcasatikā-Khandhaka*)

Mahāsmṃghika Vinaya: T 1425: vol. 22, 489ff.

Mahīśāsaka Vinaya: T 1421: vol. 22, 190ff.

Dharmaguptaka Vinaya: T 1428: vol. 22, 966ff.

Sarvāstivādin Vinaya: T 1435: vol. 23, 445ff.

Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya: T 1451: vol. 24, 402ff.

Translations of the main parts of these accounts (excepting that from the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya*) can be found in Jean Przyluski, *Le Concile de Rājagṛha*, Paris, Paul Geuthner 1926–1928. My account of the story is a generalized one that is accurate for most versions. Although I believe the *buddhavaṇana* criterion for sūtra to be implicit even in the oldest accounts, which are certainly pre-Mahāyāna, it does become more explicit in the later accounts, which may well be post-Mahāyāna in their present forms.

- 9 The term 'dharma' is often used to refer to *sūtra* in the early literature, and this usage is customary in the accounts of the First Council.
- 10 Ānanda recites the entire *sūtra-piṭaka* in the Mahāsāṃghika and Mūlasarvāstivādin accounts, and apparently also in the Sarvāstivādin account.
- 11 Ānanda is referred to as a 'receptacle of the dharma' in the account of the First Council given in the Introduction to the *Ekottara Āgama* preserved in Chinese (T 125: vol. 2, 549, c 11).
- 12 T 1451: vol. 24, 406, b 19–20 (*Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya* version). My translation.
- 13 T 1425: vol. 22, 491, c 5–6 (*Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya* version). My translation.
- 14 Ibid., c 25. My translation.
- 15 T 1451: vol. 24, 407, c 3–6 (*Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya* version). My translation.
- 16 See, e.g., T 1425: vol. 22, 491, c 20ff. (*Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya* version) and T 1451: vol. 24, 407, b 23–24 (*Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya* version).
- 17 Étienne Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, Louvain, Publications Universitaires 1958, p. 179.
- 18 The narrowest of the definitions is that from the *Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya*, quoted below, p. 7.
- 19 This method of expanding *buddhavaṇa* is one of the foundations of Abhidharma. It is also found in Mahāyāna texts as one means of justifying the production of Mahāyāna *sūtras*. Examples of this sort of *sūtra*-discourse in the canon are: MN I, 108 (T 26: vol. 1, 603 b), MN III, 192 (T 26: vol. 1, 696 b), AN IV, 120, AN V 46 (T 99: vol. 2, 143 a), AN V, 225 (T 26: vol. 1, 734 a), SN II, 47 (T 99: vol. 2, 95 b), SN III, 1 (T 99: vol. 2, 33 a; T 125: vol. 2, 573 a), SN IV, 93 (T 99: vol. 2, 56 c).
Throughout the following section on the early canon I have based my research primarily on the Pali Canon but have in each case sought in addition for the corresponding passage in the *āgamas* preserved in Chinese. We can be thus assured that we are not dealing with matters peculiar to the Theravādin tradition. Where such corresponding passages have been found—with the help of Akaṇama Chizen's *The Comparative Catalogue of Chinese Āgamas and Pāli Nikāyas*, Tokyo, Hajinkaku-Shobo 1958—they are indicated in brackets after the Pali reference. In each case the Chinese passage agrees with its Pali equivalent on the point in question unless there is indication to the contrary. Reference is generally to the first page (or, in the case of the Chinese, section) of the *sūtra*.
- 20 'Sāriputta, I may teach Dhamma in brief [*saṅkhittena*], and again I may teach it in detail [*vitthārena*], and I may teach it both in brief and in detail. It is those who understand that are hard to find.' AN I, 133 (T 99: vol. 2, 255 b). The translation is by F. L. Woodward, *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikāya)*, London, Luzac 1932, I, 116.
- 21 Examples of Sāriputra expanding utterances are: SN II, 47 (T 99: vol. 2, 95 b); SN III, 1 (T 99: vol. 2, 33 a; T 125: vol. 2, 573 a).
- 22 Some examples are: DN II, 316 (T 1: vol. 1, 42 b); MN I, 212 (T 26: vol. 1, 726 c); MN I, 299 (T 26: vol. 1, 788 a); MN III, 7 (T 26: vol. 1, 653 c); MN III, 124 (T 26: vol. 1, 475 a); AN III, 186 (T 26: vol. 1, 454 a); SN I, 71 (T 99: vol. 2, 335 c); SN II, 112 (T 99: vol. 2, 81 a); SN II, 205 (T 99: vol. 2, 300 c).
- 23 The Pali phrases quoted here are from an old and very important passage describing the rise of a Buddha in the world. The passage is common; see DN I, 100 (T 1: vol. 1, 83 c) for a typical occurrence.
- 24 MN III, 29.
- 25 MN III, 8, translated by I. B. Horner, *The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, London, Luzac 1959, III, 58–59. (T 26: vol. 1, 653 c).
- 26 E.g.: MN I, 108 (T 26: vol. 1, 603 b; T 125: vol. 2, 743 a); MN I, 212 (T 26: vol. 1,

- 726 c; T 125: vol. 2, 710 c); MN III, 192 (T 26: vol. 1, 696 b); AN IV, 27; AN IV, 162; AN V, 225 (T 26: vol. 1, 734 a); SN I, 71 (T 99: vol. 2, 335 c; T 100: vol. 2, 392 c); SN II, 47 (T 99: vol. 2, 95 b); SN II, 205 (T 99: vol. 2, 300 c; T 100: vol. 2, 415 b).
- 27 This is commonly used in connection with *prati-bhā* constructions, discussed in the next section of the paper.
- 28 E.g.: MN II, 157; AN III, 186 (T 26: vol. 1, 454 a); AN III, 292; AN III, 314 (T 99: vol. 2, 143 b); AN III, 340 (T 99: vol. 2, 128 c); AN III, 355; AN V, 41 (T 26: vol. 1, 572 c); AN V, 46 (T 99: vol. 2, 143 a); AN V, 121; SN II, 112 (T 99: vol. 2, 81 a); SN IV, 103; SN V, 293 (T 99: vol. 2, 139 a).
- 29 E.g.: MN I, 114 (T 26: vol. 1, 604c, 17ff.); MN III, 25ff.; AN V, 229 (T 26: vol. 1, 735 b, 20ff.). See also the *Kassapa-saṃyutta*, SN II, 194ff., especially SN II, 210 ff. (T 99: vol. 2, 302 a; T 100: vol. 2, 416 c).
- 30 T 1415: vol. 22, 336, a 21–23. My translation.
- 31 See J. Gonda's excellent treatment of this in his *The Vision of the Vedic Poets*, The Hague, Mouton 1963, pp. 14ff. and throughout.
- 32 Ibid., p. 318.
- 33 The cases are: DN III, 209 (T 1: vol. 1, 49, c 3–4); MN I, 46; MN I, 354 (T 99: vol. 2, 316, b 6–7—not certain that the construction is present); MN II, 31 (T 26: vol. 1, 783 c–784 a—not certain that the construction is present); AN V, 122–123; AN V, 125; SN I, 155; SN II, 36–37; SN II, 198 (T 99: Vol. 2, 299 c 16; T 100: vol. 2, 414, b 1)—this passage also occurs elsewhere; SN IV, 184 (T 99: vol. 2, 316, b 6–7).
- 34 AN V, 122ff., translated by F. L. Woodward, *Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikāya)*, London, Luzac 1936, V, 83–84.
- 35 Ibid., 124.
- 36 The cases are: AN III, 239; SN I, 81 (T 99: vol. 2, 306, b 12–14; T 100: vol. 2, 399, c 16–17); SN I, 189 (T 99: vol. 2, 332, a 18–20; T 100: vol. 2, 462, c 1–3); SN I, 190 (T 99: vol. 2, 329, c 5–6; T 100: vol. 2, 457, a 3–4); SN I, 191 (T 99: vol. 2, 330, c 2–3; T 100: vol. 2, 457, c 16–17); SN I, 192f. (T 99: vol. 2, 332, b—with some changes, but see lines 20–21); SN I, 194 (T 99: vol. 2, 329, b 15–16; T 100: vol. 2, 456, c 15–16); SN I, 195 (T 99: vol. 2, 329, c 22–23; T 100: vol. 2, 457, a 19–20); SN I, 195 (T 99: vol. 3, 329, a 28–29; T 100: vol. 2, 456, b 28–29).
- 37 SN I, 191–92, translated by C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Kindred Sayings (Saṃyutta-Nikāya)*, London, Luzac 1950, I, 243–244. (T 99: vol. 2, 330, c 4–18; T 100: vol. 2, 457, c 18–28).
- 38 MN I, 395–396, translated by I. B. Horner, *The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-Nikāya)*, London, Luzac 1957, II, 63–64.
- 39 SN I, 193, translated by C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Kindred Sayings*, I, 245. (T 99: vol. 2, 322, b 20–28).
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 See the *Vaṅṣa Suttas*, SN I, 185ff. (T 99: vol. 2, 329, 9ff.).
- 42 My translation. See SN I, 196 (cf. T 99: vol. 2, 331, c 24; T 100: vol. 2, 462, b 5) and *Theragāthā*, verse 1262. See also SN I, 110 (T 99: vol. 2, 285, c 16–18; T 100: vol. 2, 382, b 22–25) and the translator's comments, *Kindred Sayings*, I, 138, n. 6 regarding this term.
- 43 AN IV, 163. My translation.
- 44 Ibid., 164, translated by E. M. Hare, *Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikāya)*, London, Luzac 1935, IV, 112.
- 45 DN II, 123 (T 1: vol. 1, 17b–18a); AN II, 167.
- 46 AN IV, 143, translated by Hare, *Gradual Sayings*, IV, 96–97.
- 47 This we determine from a comparison of the surviving *sūtra-piṭakas* of the different

sects. The changes are certainly greater than that which the Christian canon underwent after being fixed (in part because the *sūtra-piṭaka* was preserved orally for centuries in most sects) but there is, on the whole, considerable resistance to change observable, the major exception being the *Ekottara Āgama* preserved in Chinese. The creativity of the latter is almost certainly due to its connection with Mahāyāna. References and further remarks can be found in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, *A Study of the Śrāmaṇaphala Sūtra*, Harvard University 1978.

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